Myra Mire walks through 4-year-old Leyland cypress trees at her and husband Harold Mire's Cornerview Tree Farm near Gonzales. Their Christmas tree farm, like many others in Louisiana, opens Thanksgiving Day. Some farms open a day or two later.

Holiday time is harvest time

Growers winding up year of work on Christmas trees and poinsettias

For the men and women who grow Louisiana Christmas trees or all those brilliant red and green poinsettias that fill the stores this time of year, this is the season of the payoff. They've been working months getting ready for this brief, hectic stretch of the year between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

For wholesale greenhouse manager Pat Heroman, getting ready for this season began soon after the rest of us were packing away last year's Christmas trees. By the time the Christmas rush winds down, Heroman expects to move some 250,000 potted poinsettias from greenhouses near Prairieville.

His sales will be in the $700,000 to $750,000 range. But the poinsettia market is not only for the big growers. Heroman says there are several independents who put smaller numbers of poinsettias on the market every season.

At least two East Baton Rouge Parish high schools, Zachary and Baker, also will sell poinsettia plants. Broadmoor High would have offered poinsettias but a storm that hit Baton Rouge Oct. 22 sent a tree crashing into the greenhouse, says James Richmond, a teacher.

Zachary High teacher Kathy Conolly says her class has about 500 poinsettias and a few Christmas cactuses for sale about Dec. 1. They were raised by junior and senior level students as their first semester vocational agriculture project. They will be ready about Dec 1.

Baker High School teacher James Hadden says poinsettias are a project for his advanced agriculture students. After giving plants to the students, the school will have about 100 poinsettias for sale, with the proceeds used to buy materials for their course, Hadden says.

Americans are expected to buy 35 million Christmas trees this year, according to Alden Main, Christmas tree farmer and Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service tree specialist.

Only a small fraction of those trees will be grown in Louisiana, but their value adds up. Last year, Louisiana's Christmas tree growing business sold 155,007 Christmas trees. Main says gross farm income, "counting value added through the market chain," from Louisiana's 267 Christmas tree growers was $6 million.

Heroman is general manager of his father Fred's wholesale greenhouses near Prairieville. Pat himself owns a live-plant maintenance business.

Poinsettias occupy major space in the 12 to 14 acres under glass. And poinsettias are only part of the seasonal business. Hidden away in cool, dark chambers, bulbs that will produce flowers for other holidays are already set—tulips and daffodils for the Valentine's Day market, lilies...
for Easter, for example.

Heroman’s poinsettias show up in chain stores in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. Poinsettias don’t travel well, Heroman says, so most go to destinations within 300 miles of Baton Rouge.

Joel Poinsett, diplomat, introduced the United States to the plant that bears his name after he saw it growing in Mexico more than a century and a half ago. But today’s “poinsettia man of the world” is Californian Paul Ecke, Heroman says. Ecke’s plant patents give him control over much of the live starter material greenhouses grow. Heroman buys his material from Ecke and grows “mother plants” from which come the cuttings that will be potted to grow into the salable plants.

Heroman and the 45 to 65 greenhouse employees go to work on the next year’s plants in January and February.

“It’s an 11-month crop. It’s something that has to be thought through and it’s working in the future,” Heroman says.

Sales are lined up early. “We don’t plant anything that isn’t sold,” Heroman says.

Getting a plant to grow isn’t the hard part. The trick is getting them to put on their brilliant show at the right time. Poinsettias switch from their growing stage to the blooming stage when nights grow long. “A long night is very critical to them,” he says.

The long-night requirement fits right into the season leading up to Christmas, but Heroman says any light on the plant at night, save moonlight, stops the blooming stage. For this reason the Heromans moved the greenhouses out of Baton Rouge to a country place to get away from city lights.

“If you can read a newspaper next to your poinsettias, it’s too much light,” Heroman says.

Poinsettias come not only in red, but in white, yellow and pink, but Heroman says 90 to 95 percent of the demand is for red.

The poinsettia’s attraction is in the brilliantly colored bracts, a circle of modified leaves surrounding the tiny bud-like flowers. Their redness contrasts vividly with the dark green, true leaves. The brighter the daytime light, the redder the bracts become.

Christmas tree farmers in Louisiana and Mississippi formed an association, and every season they publish a list of members’ tree farms. List of the farms are available from a county agent. Many of the farms also advertise at Christmas.

Some Louisiana grown trees are sold on lots, as trees from northern forests are. Many farms, however, invite customers to come and select and cut their own tree.

Main says 39 parishes have Christmas tree growers now. Larger operations and the most successful ones are near cities that provide a good volume of customers, he says.

Louisiana tree growers may offer only one variety, like the Virginia pine, or several — Virginia pines, red cedars, Leyland cypress and loblolly pines.

They try to catch customers’ attention with extras.

A St. Tammany farm offers a drawing for a seven-foot stocking, has a picnic area and “antique sleigh for picture taking.” Another offers wagon rides and Santa Claus on weekends. A Lafayette Parish farm advertises free greenery while it lasts with purchase of a tree. Free pony rides and hayrides are lures at a Rapides Parish farm. A Washington parish farm advertises “Santa’s sleigh and reindeer and the Christmas ostrich.”

Most offer services or conveniences like providing saws, tree flocking or access to a restroom, or products like wreaths, garlands and tree stands.